

New Bottles, Old Wine: Communicative Language Teaching in China

By *Leng Hui*

As the country with the largest English learning population in the world, China is deeply involved in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, due to economic, administrative, cultural, and population constraints, and the academic abilities of classroom teachers, China has to work to adapt CLT to local conditions. Modified varieties of CLT might suit the present conditions for the time being, but they are far from scientific, since, as practiced in the classroom, they are not usually selected on the basis of academic research. If the current situation is not reoriented, or if the constraining factors are not overcome, traditional, non-communicative approaches are likely to return under other guises. Nevertheless, motivated classroom teachers are the potential key to overcoming the existing constraining factors if they are equipped with applicable linguistic and psychological theories and useful methods through stimulating teacher training courses.

China and CLT

China started CLT in the early 70s. In 1979, Li Xiaojun and her colleagues in Guangzhou began writing and teaching a set of communicative English textbooks entitled *Communicative English for Chinese Learners* (CECL). CECL asserts that "language is communication, and learning a language is learning to communicate" (Li 1984:2). Since that time several projects such as *Junior English for China* (JEC) have integrated topics relevant to Chinese students and common daily expressions in communication with grammatical structures. Such integration, in fact, represents the weak version of CLT (Howatt 1984:279), which fosters the development of communicative competence.

Some Existing Factors that Constrain CLT

Though teachers in China on the whole realize the importance of CLT and are trying to catch up with the new trend, CLT is constrained in China by such factors as the economy, administration, culture, population, and the teachers' academic ability.

A. Economic factors. China is developing fast, but teachers as a whole are still relatively underpaid. In order to seek a balance, many English teachers in the tertiary and secondary levels have a second or even a third extra teaching job, which, on average, adds an additional 50% to the teaching load. Although there are many advantages of such extra teaching, it does not motivate teachers to do classroom research, which takes time and energy without bringing teachers immediate monetary rewards. Consequently, few university teachers will spend time analyzing learners' needs or designing their own syllabi, nor will they collect suitable materials

to create communicative tasks and activities. What they do frequently, instead, is lecture to students using the readily printed texts and language points, which makes their teaching easy and safe but proves to be non- communicative and ineffective.

For the teachers who are eager to try their own materials for communicative activities, there are economic constraints. For instance, photocopying is not provided to Chinese teachers (with the exception of foreign teachers) by the authorities. Money needs to be collected from the students, and if the students are unwilling to pay, teachers have to make do without the necessary materials.

Libraries in China do not contain enough authentic English books, newspapers, and magazines for teacher and student use. Overhead projectors and computers are rare and are used for only a few demonstration classes. The unavailability of resources wastes teachers' energy and time, making teaching preparation a painstaking process. Consequently, it prevents teachers from appreciating the deserved value of CLT.

B. Administrative factors. Middle schools in China use communicative textbooks which include communicative tasks and activities. However, when teaching performances are evaluated by the administrators, the focus is on teachers. Teachers are graded in terms of how well they speak English, how well they demonstrate the language points, how well they use the blackboard or other teaching realia, and how well they discipline students. Students and their learning processes are largely ignored. As a result, teachers are more active than students, who simply follow their teachers rigidly and mechanically. The fast- paced lessons leave students no time for reflection or communication.

Although administrators usually guide teachers, they may not be experts in English teaching. Consequently, they may impose materials on teachers which are not communicative and do not conform to course goals and may include material in the examinations unrelated to the class.

C. Cultural factors. Basically, China has a Confucian culture, which seeks compromise between people. When it is applied to language learning, it is obvious that students are reluctant to air their views loudly for fear of losing face or offending others. For this reason, group discussion may be less fruitful than individual essay-writing. In addition, there are some Chinese sayings which discourage oral communication in class. The following are some examples:

Silence is gold; Eloquence is silver;
It's easier said than done;
It's the noisy bird that is easily shot dead;
A real man should be good at thinking, but weak at speaking;
Don't speak out unless spoken to;
A man should be responsible for his words;
What has been said can't be unsaid;
Keep your mouth shut but your eyes open;
Keep silent unless you can burst on the scene like a bombshell;
Downy lips make thoughtless slips.

In Chinese culture, teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. If teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures, or if they play games with students or ask students to role-play in class, then they are not doing their job! Meanwhile, teachers are too authoritative to be challenged so far as knowledge is concerned. Students are not in the habit of arguing for their own point of view, even if teachers accidentally make mistakes. Students have been trained to be obedient and to learn by rote ever since kindergarten.

D. Population factors. China has a very large English-learning population. When this population is divided into classes in secondary schools, it is common to find English classes with 60 or 70 students. The crowded classroom leaves hardly any room for free communicative activities such as information-gap or problem-solving tasks, especially those which require moving around or passing messages to one another.

Although CLT should be learner-centered with "full rein.given to students' initiative" (Li Xiaojun 1984:9), such a large English-learning population in China makes learner-centered teaching difficult. In most large English classes, there are students of very different proficiency levels. Teachers who want to involve students can do so only with a small number of them, usually the top ones. It is easy to teach these top students because they are usually very cooperative. The top students can follow the teachers, whether the teaching is effective or not.

Students with a low language proficiency level present challenges to teachers and require special care and effort. These students often have difficulties in understanding teachers and in expressing themselves, and thus remain inactive in class. Teachers have to slow down or repeat themselves if they want to encourage these students to participate and have to design special activities to lessen their anxiety if they join the class. Although adjusting lessons to low-level learners is to some extent more learner-centered, the pace is slow and many teachers do not have enough teaching hours to meet the needs of the student regularly in class. So, many teachers have to teach at the expense of the majority of such poor students, who are usually left uncared for.

E. Academic abilities of classroom teachers. Although in theory scholars try to keep up with developments in CLT, when it comes to down-to-earth practice, most classroom teachers do not fully understand CLT and communicative competence. There are not enough opportunities for every teacher, both at the tertiary level and at the secondary level, to systematically study linguistic theories and theories of second language acquisition. Therefore many teachers do not distinguish real communicative activities from false ones, mistaking linguistic activities with some artificial classroom situations for communicative tasks.

In October, 1995, I attended an open class in which the teacher demonstrated communicative teaching. One of her teaching tasks was to make her students learn to use such and so. Before class, she prepared a large, but empty, carton in the corner of the classroom. Later during the class she picked up the carton and said, "It's such a heavy box that I can't hold it. Who can help me? It's so heavy that I can't hold it. Help me, please!" The sentences were good and clear, and were repeated several times, but there was no response from her students. No one went up to the front to help the teacher, for everyone saw that the box was not heavy at all and the teacher herself was holding it very easily.

Communicative activities require real situations, real roles, and real needs and purposes for communication. But in the above case, none of the conditions was met, for nothing but the carton was real, which did not contribute to real communication.

Most classroom teachers have little, if any, sociolinguistic knowledge (the type of knowledge focus on the appropriate use of language in context), which leads to inappropriate teaching. For instance, in the national middle school English textbook, there is a simplified text of Mark Twain's "One Million Pound Note," which describes an episode in which the poor hero, Henry, after having found a one-million pound note, went to a tailor to buy a cheap suit. But the snobbish shopping assistant, Todd, served him coldly. "The fellow I spoke to made no answer at first, looked me up and down, noticed that I was almost in rags, and said, 'Just a moment.' "

When teaching this segment, many teachers asked students to change Todd's reply, "Just a moment," to a complete sentence. They told the students that the correct answer was "Would you please wait for me for just a minute?" The answer is grammatically correct, but is totally wrong according to the context and the relationship between the shabby Henry and the snobbish Todd at that time.

CLT advocates that students should learn what is real and relevant to them, a point ignored by many teachers. When teaching how to use the word "every" as in "every two days," some teachers asked students to translate the following sentence into Chinese: "The milkman comes here every five days." There is no doubt that students could translate it perfectly, but, in reality, such a sentence is not as real as, "The milkman comes here every other day/every two days." Since in daily life, if he does not want to get fired, the milkman usually sends fresh milk every day or every other day in China.

The above examples collected from real classrooms certainly do not represent every teaching situation in China, but to a large extent, they show that many English teachers are not aware of language appropriacy. What they teach students are isolated sentences correct in grammatical form that are not authentic or acceptable in real communicative occasions.

The inductive way of teaching is another clear-cut feature of CLT because it is believed that the linguistic system can best be learned through the process of using it for communication. But most Chinese teachers are so accustomed to deductive ways of teaching that they do not apply induction, even when provided with communicative materials.

When teaching JEC, which was designed for the development of communicative competence, many teachers continue to lecture on the usage of words, phrases, and grammar. They do not use the materials to facilitate communication between students or between students and texts so as to let them internalize the language system themselves. In other words, the teacher is still a proponent of the deductive way of teaching, though she is practicing CLT.

Meaning is paramount in CLT, yet many teachers in China constrain students one way or another when they are communicating for the purpose of meaning. For example, a teacher once stopped his student repeatedly and arbitrarily when he asked a female student to retell the text of Albert Einstein at the end of the lesson. She was confident in her own way of retelling the text and

started very fluently. But the teacher stopped her and asked her to retell it according to the pictures on the blackboard. The student had not expected this because the pictures were stuck to the board without her knowledge while she was preparing to retell the story. Also because the pictures were arranged differently from her retelling sequence, she was puzzled and hesitated for a while in front of the whole class. She then adjusted her thoughts quickly and started again by referring to the pictures in her own words. The teacher was still not satisfied, and he asked her to use the clues he had given on the board. Since the teacher had not told the students to use them before they started, the poor student had to adjust again. She could not understand the clues on the board and was confused and kept silent. Her communication for the purpose of meaning broke down.

Overcoming the Constraints

It is obvious that CLT has its place in China, and most English teachers have accepted it as a teaching reform. Like any other kind of reform, CLT in China needs to be modified and adapted smoothly in the first stage to overcome the constraints; otherwise it may meet with criticism. Those few who are against it and those who do not make the effort to meet the challenges of CLT will defend themselves loudly to resume the traditional or the so-called convenient ways of teaching.

Classroom teachers are the key to overcoming the constraints. China is such a big country and so diversified that it is impossible for the Chinese State Education Commission to call for a specific, unified teaching method to tackle the infinite teaching problems in classrooms. If equipped with sufficient knowledge of linguistics through proper pre-service and in-service teacher- training courses, teachers can be qualified in making creative decisions related to CLT.

Classroom teachers are the first persons who face the brand new changes of learning needs and the most flexible in deciding what to teach and how to teach each lesson to satisfy the new needs better. With the rapid development in China, students' language learning needs vary greatly. Some students learn to go abroad, some to work in foreign trades or other careers, and some to continue their studies. Some want to improve oral English, some want to improve written communication, and some still want to learn grammar. Learning needs change faster than the Education Commission changes the national curriculum and textbooks.

Among the five constraining factors, teachers' academic ability is the one most related to classroom teaching effectiveness. Economic, administrative, cultural, and population factors are external and facilitating conditions, while teachers' academic ability is the internal and primary condition. If teachers have understood the essence of CLT and its scientific modification in China, they will acquire a positive attitude towards CLT and be motivated to overcome the constraints. For instance, another middle-school teacher in my own data, when giving a demonstration lesson, prepared her indispensable handouts at her own expense. This enabled every student in her large class to participate in a communicative activity of strip stories-reading and interaction. Shy students were also given roles to tell others what happened in their handouts. This activity indicated that in the teacher's eye, every student in her class was equal and that the teacher trusted every student impartially. Encouraged to struggle for meaning, shy

students gained self- confidence naturally through such an interesting and communicative practice.

Alternatively, when learning English, quiet students in class who do not want to express their ideas in public can be instructed patiently about English-speaking culture conventions. Or they can be entrusted with roles which will require them to interact with their partners focusing only on meaning. Later they can interact in groups or in class without being criticized for language mistakes.

The large class size is an undeniable fact, but a creative teacher is ready to rearrange the desks and chairs to leave room for various group activities. In fact, if teachers just remember to assign the job to students, they will cooperate. The administrative constraint can be solved automatically once CLT experts are elected to be leaders.

To upgrade teachers' academic abilities, teacher-training courses are necessary. In most parts of the world, the main emphasis in English teacher training courses is on methodology. However, nowadays in China, language proficiency courses for teachers are stressed and are very prevalent. Hundleby and Breet (1988) and Berry (1990) also observe that "China is a situation where teacher training is seen principally as a process of training the language level of the trainees, to the virtual exclusion of methodology." (quoted from Cullen 1994:163). Proficient language is essential for language teaching, but it is not enough for CLT. Theories of linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy support the use of creative CLT in class and should be incorporated into training programs. Educated with a necessary theoretical background, classroom teachers in China can understand better the new curriculum and the new sets of CLT textbooks, knowing the facts as well as the reasons behind the change. Moreover, equipped with the necessary knowledge, teachers can teach more scientifically, avoiding at least some of the teaching errors mentioned above. In other words, if teacher training courses in China are more theoretically based, classroom teachers will have a better understanding of the essence of CLT, and then they can be more ready to do research of their own to explore suitable ways of implementing CLT in China.

Conclusion

Because CLT in China is a rather new approach, teachers often misapply it to practice English in artificial situations or in noisy group work with shallow understanding. Instead CLT requires making decisions of what, when, and how to teach. Decisions might be made according to each teacher's experience, but scientific and correct decisions can be made only after a deep understanding of linguistics and the essence of CLT. Motivated by the value of CLT, classroom teachers will be encouraged to overcome the existing factors that constrain CLT in China. The most effective means of cultivating teachers' academic awareness is through pre-service and in-service teacher-training courses, which should be organized to promote teachers' theoretical as well as linguistic abilities. Otherwise, in the long run, it is safe to say that the top- down efforts resulting from the communicative curriculum and textbooks will be frustrated by the realities of everyday teaching in classrooms. The bottom-up effects of classroom teachers' resistance will fill the new bottles of CLT with old wine.

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